THE GOLDEN CALVES: WHAT HAPPENED?

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The episode of the Golden Calf [*egel ha'zahav*] stands as an eternal embarrassment and a blight on our distinguished yet sometimes problematic history. It remains a mystery how an intelligent people, just recently redeemed from cruel servitude by an extraordinary Divine deliverance, could succumb to the allure of an inanimate, powerless calf statue that was seen either as substitute for Moses or the figure of a god, depending on whose view one accepts.[1]

Whatever view one embraces on this does little to mitigate the incomprehensibility of it all. Even if we take the more benign view that it was a substitute for Moses, that hardly explains how an intelligent people, freshly extricated from Egypt, could see an inanimate casting of a calf as being a worthy replacement for the man who was likely appreciated by the Israelites as an heroic figure of great ability and even power.

It is imperative to try to understand what happened for more than the obvious reason; the obvious being that it is critical to understand everything that is reported in Scripture. The other weighty reason why it is crucial to understand this ugly episode is that, like it or not, the *egel* is still with us in a most tangible way.

Though the *egel* is a part of our history we would rather forget, the biblical inventory of mitzvah obligations runs contrary to that desire. It is in fact a mitzvah, an obligation, to remember how we angered God: *Remember, do not forget, how you provoked the Lord your God in the desert* (Deut. 9:7).[2] It is fair to say that nothing angered God more than the capitulation to the Golden Calf, anger to the point of wanting to destroy Israel and start off again with only Moses.[3] This we are obliged to remember.

In an age when mental health experts champion the notion of making people feel good, and not dredging up their faults or misdeeds, the Torah stands out in sharp contrast, exhorting us purposely to remember the misdeeds of our ancestors. That remembrance goes beyond reliving or recalling history.

In the words of R. Elazar Ezkari, in his classic work Sefer Haredim: "if we are commanded to remember that our ancestors provoked God in the desert, how

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much more is it incumbent upon all of us to remember that we have provoked God."[4]

Insofar as recalling the past provocations, there are significant benefits to this somewhat painful exercise. First, it teaches us that we cannot be selective, and thereby revisionist historians. If we are to appreciate our history, we need to appreciate the good and the bad – the good to emulate, the bad to avoid. But we can hardly avoid the bad if we make believe it did not happen.

Moreover, by whitewashing the bad, we create the framework for doing exactly the same with present day trespass; namely making believe it did not happen and moving forward in feigned but unavoidably fake innocence. That is nothing less than a recipe for moral disaster.

Second, this teaches a most important lesson of appreciation to God, for God's patience, past and present. God never gives up on Israel, and that faith of God in us is a most powerful message. Assuredly, it is something to appreciate but not to rely on in advance of any contemplated breach.

Third, the *egel* episode stands out as rank ingratitude to God. After all that God had done for the people, uncompromising fidelity to God would have been an expected norm, not even anything unusual. Yet this was not the case. If our ancestors who experienced God in awesome majesty still were capable of ingratitude, this should at the very least remove from us any smugness we might have about our faith. Faith can never be presumed to be so entrenched, or so pure, as to be beyond being compromised. If our ancestors could manifest ingratitude, we certainly are capable of such insubordination. This translates into being constantly vigilant about the nature and depth of our faith in God.

The *egel*, then, is still with us. And it is less to impose guilt than to inspire meaningful and continually reinforcing faith. Psychologists may not like this, but it makes for a more vibrant spirit.

There is a view that the *parah adumah* [red heifer] reading that follows a bit after Purim is a biblically-mandated reading.[5] The Gaon of Vilna and Magen Avraham, among others, reject this view as there is no source for it, and no reason or hint to such an obligation.[6]

R. Barukh Epstein[7] has a most novel explication of this issue. He cites Rashi on Numbers (19:22) in the name of R. Moshe Ha'darshan, that the purpose and

goal
of the rituals associated with the red heifer were designed to atone for the *egel*, the Golden Calf débâcle. He goes on to point out, consistent with previous observations in this presentation, that the biblical mitzvah obligation to recall [*zakhor*] the Golden Calf episode is on par with other mitzvah obligations. And, in the view of Magen Avraham, the reason why we do not recall this, as indeed we recall [*zakhor*] what Amalek plotted against us, is that it also recalls and reminds of Israel's ignominy. R. Epstein questions whether this is reason enough to negate a clear biblical mandate; namely, that to avoid embarrassing Israel we should eliminate a mitzvah.

He also cites the Talmud (Megillah 25a), to the effect that the original *egel* story is read publicly and translated, referring to the custom then to read not only the Torah text on Shabbat, but also the translation of each verse. Translation assures that the people actually understand the original text.

The *egel* text is read and translated because even though it speaks disparagingly of Israel, it is still desirable in the big picture, as it affords the opportunity for atonement. That same logic should apply for purposefully recalling the *egel* episode, R. Epstein argues. He therefore brilliantly suggests that this mitzvah to remember is in fact not eliminated, and that it is fulfilled through the red heifer reading. The red heifer reading at once recalls the *egel* disaster and avoids direct embarrassment of the people. So, the *egel* is with us even when we do not realize it.

Even though there are some positive, helpful messages that derive from this haunting experience, the experience itself still defies logic, and begs for at least some understanding.

The Talmud (Megillah 25a) points out that there are two *egel* episodes; the first as it occurred and the second as it is reported by Aaron to Moses. The first, the actual story, is read and translated, the second is read but not translated. Rashi offers a most intriguing explanation for this. In Aaron's recall of the *egel* story, he tells his brother that *'this* egel *came out,'* leaving the implication to the unschooled that there may be substance to the *egel*, in that it came out on its own. They would not suspect this from the text, but might derive that from the translation. Therefore, the story as reported by Aaron is not translated.

In fact, the story as recalled by Aaron is inconsistent with the original report. The original has it that the people took off their earrings and brought them to

Aaron, who put them into a form and made a molten *egel* (Ex. 32:3-4). In Aaron's version, he threw the gold into the fire and out came *'this* egel*'* (v. 32:24), as if he, Aaron, had nothing to do with what came out. Did Aaron lie? Certainly there are many commentators who point out that Aaron's version differs from the Torah report. There is even a suggestion that he did lie.[8]

Further, Aharon's reference to *'this* egel*'* is somewhat problematic, seeing that just a few verses prior (v. 32:20) we are informed that Moses took the *egel* that they made and burned it in the fire and reduced it to small pieces, then spread it over water and made the Israelites drink it. If so, how could Aaron refer to *'this* egel*'* when it no longer existed?

As a way to explain this strange and complicated story, it is actually possible to resolve the inconsistency in Aaron's version in a manner not suggested by the classical commentators, but not necessarily out of bounds. It relates to Aaron's intentions and the intentions of the diabolical in Israel's midst, the fifth column who wanted to undermine the faith base of the people.

Aaron asked for all the gold, received it, placed it all in a form, and made a molten statue of a calf. His intention was to create something so lifeless that it would be absurd for any normal person to believe that such an entity had any power. But the fifth column, as per Rashi, rushed to embrace this, in the plural – these are the "powers" that brought you out of Egypt.

Consider this possibility: As Aaron is dutifully creating a lifeless image, the fifth column is covering a live calf with gold, so that as Aaron is taking out a lifeless form, they produce a live one. Rashi actually alludes to the magicians who made this happen. We can even appreciate this on a rational level, that it was a smoke and mirrors trick, and that in fact there were two of the *egel*, one inanimate, the other very much alive.

It was the live one that caused the uproar that energized the people to follow the fifth column. When Moses comes down, he destroys the inanimate *egel*. When Aaron explains himself, he says that *"this* egel,*"* the live one, came out without his knowledge. He was not being deceptive at all. He was telling the story exactly the way it happened.

In the end, we are told that God rebuked the people for making the *egel* that Aaron made (v. 32:35). This strange convolution – *making the* egel *that Aaron*

made – makes sense in this theory. Aaron made what he thought would be a harmless statue, but the others made out of it another *egel* that had life.

If in fact this is what occurred, then one can see how a normally rational people were startled and taken aback, stunned into silence by the inexplicable phenomenon of seeing a live calf jump out of a fire of golden earrings. They were duped, to be sure, but in the heat of the moment, that reality did not register.

There were not only two versions of the *egel* story; there were quite possibly two calves, one of solid gold and the other a gilded live creature.

What is achieved with this explanation of what happened? There were certainly unsavory characters among the people. But the rest did not have an anti-God agenda. They were befuddled, stunned by the unbelievable unfolding right in front of them, but not evil or ungrateful people.

Whatever unfolded in that dismal circumstance was tragic, and even though partially understandable, still reverberates with a most powerful message that resonates to this day – the message that nothing should ever compromise unwavering faith in God.

NOTES

1. Rashi and Hizkuni lean on the side of it being a substitute for Moses, while Targum Yonatan ben Uziel leans toward it being a god-figure.
2. See on this my *Best-Kept Secrets of Judaism* (Southfield, Michigan: Targum/Feldheim, 2002) pp. 37-38.
3. Exodus 32:10.
4. *Sefer Haredim,* p. 73, no. 23. See further my *Best-Kept Secrets of Judaism*, pp.39-40.
5. Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim, 685:7.
6. Magen Avraham ad. loc.cites many sources that reject the view that the *Parah Adumah* reading is biblically based. The Gaon of Vilna states that the view cited in Shulhan Arukh that it is a biblical obligation is based on a faulty text.
7. As cited in *Ituray Torah* to Sefer Shemot edited by Aharon Yaakov Greenberg (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1966) p. 313.
8. See R. Eliyahu Mizrahi, ad.loc., who states that out of fear of Moses, Aharon lied.